

J. E. KNAUF

PRESS

WESTERN ART'S "WILD BUNCH" WON'T BE CORRALLED

AZ Republic, 2/2000

By Ann Parker

An earth tremor in the western art world has been quietly building in the Mesa studio of painter Maria Sharylen. Putting their heads together, Sharylen and fellow painter J.E. Knauf have founded The Other Side of the West, a new gathering of artists out to shake up certain stereotypes. New visual icons which may give decorative western paintings, encountered all too often everywhere but especially in hotel rooms and dental offices, a run for the money.

The group's 10 members are drawn from different points West: J.D. Challenger, Robert Daughters, J.E. Knauf and Sharylen all maintain studios on Arizona's Sonoran desert soil. John Axton, David DeVary, Bill Schenck and K. Douglas Wiggins share the fabled light of northern New Mexico. Nelson Boren has staked out territory in Idaho leaving Ben Wright as the lone Texan. Ages are as diverse as locales. Daughters is in his 70's while Wright has yet to wrack up 40 years.

While most artistic alliances are created around similar styles, this is not true of the rugged individualists comprising The Other Side of the West. Akin to the facets of a mosaic, these artists have honed their own individual perceptions of the West. With the exception of no pastel Indians or homogenized cowboys, there are not rules engraved in stone.

The only woman in the group, co-founder Sharylen's sphere of influence encompasses indigenous Southwestern and Mexican peoples. Her sensual canvases draws the viewer into the daily life of different cultures; one can practically hear the women talking, smell the spices being ground. Sweat instead of spices is what comes to mind when looking at Knauf's painting of a bronc rider. The wild-eyed horse and straining rider seem joined in some kind of brutal ballet; leaping and whirling and destined to crash to earth with bone-jarring impact.

Rejoicing in their differences, members of this "Wild Bunch" are joined by a maverick mentality. "These are very successful people who specialize in massaging, twisting, and sometimes shattering traditional concepts of western art", points out Knauf.

Maverick is certainly the operative word for J.D. Challenger, who also lives in the southeast Valley. "I'm not interested in the white man's version of history," he stresses. "I'm going to tell the story the way that the Indians want it told." This big gun of the art world is internationally known for his sensitive, haunting paintings of the nation's first inhabitants. The stolid Native Americans, who patiently stare back at the viewer from Challenger's imposing canvases, seem waiting to tell stories imbued with wisdom and tempered by grief. Thanks to a traveling exhibit organized by the Arizona Commission on the Arts and ready to make its debut this spring, the earth tremor potential of this iconoclastic group has been cranked up a notch or two. "With paintings by 10 of the most well-known artists working in the genre today, The Other Side of

the West show will offer viewers a more contemporary, creative and less rigid view of the place we call the West," says Sherry Medina, the Commission's show coordinator. Co-sponsored by "Cowboys & Indians" magazine, the exhibit of 40-50 paintings will tour nationally for two years.

The gala opening for the exhibit is set for April 29th at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum in Wickenburg and the show will continue through June 18. (For more information, call 520-684-2272.) The Arizona House of Representatives has been mentioned as a subsequent destination.

"No matter where the show goes, for the viewer it's covering new ground and leaving the corral far behind," says Sharylen.